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Editorials:

Kennedy's Policies Get Wide Airing

Early on, as the British would say, the Kennedy administration is demonstrating a disposition to employ extraordinary methods to establish effective public relations. Innovations in the presidential press conference have been widely reported, commended, and criticized. And the State department, which has perhaps the most delicate and difficult-to-sell role of any executive instrumentality subject to the constant scrutiny of the general public, is engaging in a new form of grooming its public image.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors in April, 1955, described the presidential press conference as "the unofficial and extra-legal counterpart in the American system of the question period in the British system." Much the same may be said for press conferences of the secretary of State.

In an important sense these sessions with the press go beyond the British practice of having government ministers answer questions from members of the law-making body. Not only are they proper occasions for answering criticism and explaining policy, but also they present opportunities for the President and his principal agents to breach the gap between Washington and the general public.

Effective as presidential or secretarial press conferences can be in institutional public relations, the Kennedy administration obviously believes they can be augmented. The first sign of this was a two-day State department background briefing for radio and television commentators and public affairs program directors in early April. These meetings were not widely noted in the press, in part because at the last minute it was decided to conduct them on an off-the-record basis rather than allow attribution.

Nevertheless, there was no holding back. Secretary of State Dean Rusk shared the job of foreign policy exegesis with his under secretaries, Central Intelligence Director Allen W. Dulles, Edward R. Murrow, director of the U.S. Information Agency, and President Kennedy himself.

Now it is the turn of editorial writers and columnists from newspapers and magazines coming to Washington from far and wide next Monday and Tuesday. The President again is expected to address the group. And the advance program lists as discussing their own fields of competence James E. Webb, chief of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration; Adlai E. Stevenson, representative to the United Nations; G. Mennen Williams, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs; Adolf A. Berle, chairman of a Kennedy task force on Latin America; Charles E. Bohlen, Rusk's Kremlinologist; Under Secretary Chester Bowles.

The program goes on to include George W. Ball, Under Secretary for Economic Affairs; Murrow; Dulles; Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Chairman Lyman L. Lemnitzer of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Foy D. Kohler, Assistant Secretary for European Affairs.

Obviously what is planned is what diplomats call a tour d'horizon, a comprehensive run-down on American positions throughout the globe. It may be that no hard news at all will emanate from the briefing. But opinion-molders from Santa Barbara to Syracuse will have met and heard and questioned the top foreign policy brass—and conceivably could be so sensitized as to render them more cordial than critical toward the future policies pursued by the administration.